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# The Disintegration of Yemeni Nationalism

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the transformation of Yemeni nationalism from its peak following the country's unification in 1990 to its gradual disintegration in the ensuing decades. It explores the interplay of factors contributing to the erosion of a once robust national identity, highlighting the significant shift post-1994, the rise of the Southern Movement in 2007, and the escalation of the Yemeni Civil War from 2015 onwards. The paper identifies three concurrent factors that have led to the decline of Yemeni nationalism: The negative shift in the material conditions of the populace, particularly the South. Second, the presence of fragmenting factors like entrenched regional identities. Third, the absence of mitigating factors such as unifying leadership or a common enemy, which could counterbalance divisive elements.

**Keywords**

Yemeni nationalism – national identity – disintegration of national identity – regional identities – Southern Movement – Yemeni civil war – material conditions – political upheaval – nation-building

## 1 Introduction

Yemen, once a shining example of nationalism, now seems to be a nation in disarray. This dramatic shift raises important questions about the waning of Yemeni nationalism, particularly given the strong nationalistic fervor that marked Yemen's unification in 1990. The academic discourse on Yemen, how-

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ever, has overlooked the change in Yemen's nationalist trajectory, particularly in the literature that emerged post-1994. The focus of these scholarly works predominantly revolves around the state's structure and governance, often overlooking aspects of Yemeni nationalism.[1]

Explicit discussions on Yemeni nationalism are rare, with Fred Halliday (1990, 1997) and Lisa Wedeen (2008) being two of the few to directly address this theme. Much of the existing literature on Yemen either sidelines the subject of Yemeni nationalism or touches upon it only in relation to broader sociopolitical themes. For example, Steven Day (2010) indirectly explores Yemeni nationalism in the context of the Southern Movement and the events following Yemen's unification in 1990, but these aspects are not the central focus.

This gap becomes even more pronounced when examining the general landscape of nationalism studies. which traditionally have primarily focused on the birth and evolution of nations, exploring the factors that contribute to the formation and strengthening of national identities (e.g. Gellner 2008, Anderson 2017, Smith 2009, Hobsbawm 2012, Wimmer 2020, and Chatterjee 2007). These studies delve into the processes through which national consciousness emerges and solidifies, often in the context of state-building, anticolonial struggles, or cultural unification. However, there is a conspicuous lack of emphasis on the decline of national identities.

In addressing this gap, this essay focuses on the trajectory of Yemeni nationalism, especially its gradual decline in the post-1994 era. It posits that national decline occurs because of the simultaneous existence of three conditions. First is a negative shift in the material conditions of the populace, such as escalating inequality or the devastating effects of war, exemplified by the economic deterioration post-1994 Yemen. Second is the presence of fragmenting factors like entrenched regional identities, or historical grievances, as seen in the strong separatist sentiments in Southern Yemen. Third is the absence of mitigating factors such as a unifying leadership or a common enemy, which could counterbalance divisive elements. This convergence serves as the context in which national identity declines.

By doing so, it seeks to enrich the existing literature on nationalism by adding a dimension that has been relatively underexplored, namely the decline of nationalism. This approach is not only crucial for a holistic understand-

1 For instance, Charles Schmitz (2001) provides insight into how globalization has not drastically altered Yemen's traditional economic integration into world markets, but rather, it has provided opportunities for the country's political elite to reshape their role and maintain their power through strategic geopolitical maneuvers. Sara Philips (2011) exposes how Saleh's government maintained its grip on power by perpetuating a state of crisis.

ing of nationalism as a dynamic and evolving concept but is also essential for comprehending the specific socio-political realities of Yemen. The essay thus contributes to the field of nationalism studies by providing insights into how national identities can decline, a phenomenon as significant as their formation.

The study begins with the exploration of existing literature on nationalism studies and Yemeni nationalism in particular, identifying a significant gap in the research regarding the decline of nationalism. This review includes insights from various scholars who have predominantly focused on the formation and growth of nationalism, with little attention paid to its decline. Following this, there is a transition to a discussion of the evolution of Yemeni nationalism, tracing its origins and development through significant historical events and regional influences. This section provides a backdrop for understanding the current state of Yemeni nationalism. The core of the essay is dedicated to examining the disintegration of Yemeni nationalism from 1994 onwards, marked by key events such as the civil war and the rise of the Southern Movement. I analyze the reasons behind this fragility and disintegration, including regional identities, historical legacies, divisive leadership and the negative shift in material conditions. Special attention is given to the post-2015 period, highlighting how the ongoing war and political turmoil have further exacerbated the decline of national identity. Case studies are presented to illustrate these points, demonstrating the diverse and conflicting perceptions of national identity across Yemen.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 *Nationalism Literature*

#### 2.1.1 The Dominance of Formation Literature

In the field of nationalism literature, there's a predominant focus on the formation and growth of nationalism, with less attention given to its decline. Major theorists like Anderson (2017) attribute nationalism's emergence to print-capitalism, Gellner (2008) to industrialization, and Hechter (2000) to centralization. Critics of these early perspectives, such as Billig (1995), emphasize how nationalism is embedded in everyday symbols, habits, and practices. Yet even these critical views often overlook the waning of nationalism. Wimmer (2020), for instance, expands traditional nationalism studies with a comparative approach, analyzing factors like voluntary organizations in Switzerland and Belgium, state provision of public goods in Botswana and Somalia, and shared communication mediums in China and Russia. His work, however, despite its breadth, doesn't adequately address the decline of nationalism either.

The common thread running through this literature on nationalism is its focus on the phenomenon's formation or failure to form. it can be observed that there is an overwhelming preoccupation with the formation of nationalism, while its decline or disintegration is often treated as a secondary concern. This secondary status implies that the decline of nationalism is noteworthy mainly because it represents a failure of its proper establishment. For example, Darden and Grzymała-Busse's (2006) research highlights this perspective, proposing that pre-communist nationalist education was crucial in either successfully instilling or failing to instill nationalism after communism. The central concern in these discussions is how nationalism either establishes itself or fails to do so, rather than the decline of nationalism.

### 2.1.2 The Fluid Nation and Material Conditions

Nationalism is inherently fluid. This fluidity stems from the fact that a nation is a social construct, dependent on people's perception of themselves and others; in Anderson's (2017) and Searle's (2010) language, a nation is an imagined community, constructed from collective recognition. It is also pivotal to note that while nations are imagined constructs, their existence isn't any less real.[2] However, this means that it is fluid—it can decline, increase, emerge, or cease to exist as people's perceptions of themselves and others change. A key influence of these perceptions is material conditions—the tangible and practical circumstances in which individuals and societies exist. A straightforward illustration of this is the evolution of borders. Before the establishment of modern boundaries, neighboring communities mingled freely, exchanging resources and blending cultures. However, in the era of fortified borders, an "us vs. them" perception developed. This is because such borders can limit interactions, leading people on each side to cultivate distinct national identities based on their experiences and relations.

Building upon the idea of national fluidity and the influence of material conditions, it becomes essential to consider how external phenomena such as war and inequality interact with and influence the course of nationalism. Kalyvas (2006), Cederman, Wimmer, and Min (2009), along with Christopher Barrie (2018), show how wars and conflicts can both foster and fragment nationalist sentiments. They show that the experience of war can intensify national

2 This reality stems from their epistemological objectivity. It means that such knowledge can be consistently observed and confirmed by different people, regardless of their subjective perspectives, yet it is still dependent on human collective recognition. Another example of this is money, which is objective in an epistemological sense but subjective ontologically (Searle 2010).

identity, but also highlight that it can exacerbate regional, religious and ethnic divides, challenging the notion of a unified national identity.

The influence of economic disparities and inequality on national sentiments forms another pivotal aspect of contemporary studies in this field. Gurr's research (2000) and Ost's exploration (2005) highlight how economic inequalities can catalyze nationalist movements, especially in areas where communities feel marginalized or exploited. Such movements are often a reaction to what is perceived as injustices, seeking to establish a unique national identity distinct from the prevailing narratives. Additionally, others link material disparities and changes in nationalist sentiment to other factors. For example, Han (2013) connects the rise in nationalist sentiments to the rise in economic inequalities and international migration trends across Europe. This viewpoint underscores the significant role that economic variables, coupled with other challenges such as migration, play in shaping the development and transformation of nationalist sentiments. These insights offer a valuable framework for analyzing the decline of nationalism, a key focus of my thesis.

## 2.2 *Yemeni Nationalism*

### 2.2.1 Halliday and Wedeen on Yemeni Nationalism

The waning of Yemeni nationalism represents a significant yet understudied phenomenon. In the broader context, literature on Yemeni nationalism is scarce, with notable exceptions being the works of Fred Halliday (1990, 1997) and Lisa Wedeen (2008). Halliday is among the first to analyze Yemeni nationalism, offering detailed insights into its development. He explores the dynamics of Yemen's national identity struggle, considering factors like dual Arab and Yemeni affiliations, social radicalism, and the pursuit of unity between North and South Yemen. His chapters, "The Formation of Yemeni Nationalism: Initial Reflections" (Halliday 1997) and "The Enigmas of Yemeni 'Unity'" (Halliday 1990), delve into how these elements have shaped Yemen's national consciousness amidst historical challenges like colonial legacies and regional rivalries. However, Halliday's work, though unique, is not without its shortcomings. Firstly, it doesn't encompass contemporary developments. Secondly, while Halliday broadens the scope of nationalism studies beyond Europe, his work adheres to the general tradition of this field. It mainly concentrates on exploring the origin, rise, establishment, and development of nationalism, dedicating less focus to the decline or waning of nationalistic sentiments. This leaves a gap in understanding how and why nationalism can diminish, a phenomenon of significant importance in the Yemeni context, especially considering recent developments in the Yemeni scene.

On the other hand, Wedeen (2008), in her book *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen*, offers a nuanced analysis of the evolution and contemporary transformation of Yemeni nationalism, thereby echoing and expanding upon Fred Halliday's work. Firstly, she focuses on the relationship between the state and nationalism; and secondly, although her study begins in the same era as Halliday's, she continues her examination to the present-day period. Wedeen (2008a) argues in the chapter *Seeing Like a State, Acting Like a Citizen* that Yemen exemplifies how a national identity can emerge even in the absence of a strong, sovereign state. In this model, shared experiences and discourses can construct a national identity and an episodic sense of a nation even in the absence of strong state institutions. To demonstrate her point, three key events are analyzed: the presidential election of 1999, the tenth-anniversary celebration of unification in 2000, and the highly publicized crime in 2000.[3] Wedeen contends that these events reveal the state's attempts to assert its presence, the citizens' longing for a capable state, and their shared experiences creating a sense of national identity. Therefore, national identification in Yemen seems to be more closely linked to collective experiences, even in moments of state failure, than to formal state spectacles.

While Wedeen's (2008a) work is remarkable, particularly in its theoretical sophistication, it has vital limitations. Wedeen's analysis of Yemeni nationalism, focusing on unity through collective experiences, overlooks key factors that challenge the sustainability of this national identity. Her city-centric perspective, primarily based on events in Sana'a, fails to adequately account for the diversity and regional divides across Yemen. Her approach also neglects, or more precisely does not adequately consider, how material conditions and historical legacies, such as the North-South divide, profoundly impact national

3 To elaborate on one of Wedeen's examples, the widely publicized crime known as "Murders in the Morgue," On May 10, 2000, two mutilated female bodies were found in San'ā' University's medical school morgue. Within days, police arrested Sudanese mortuary technician Muhammad Ādam ʾUmar Ishāq, 45. Ādam admitted to raping and killing multiple women, including 16 in Yemen and more than 50 in Sudan, Kuwait, Chad, and the Central African Republic. According to reports, he lured women to the morgue under false pretenses, then killed, mutilated, and allegedly trafficked their organs.

Wedeen observes that the state's inability to prevent such heinous crimes sparked widespread criticism and debate about corruption and the importance of effective state institutions in the streets, mosques, media, and public spaces. This shared fear and expectation of state protection resulted in an unexpected sense of unity among Yemenis of various backgrounds, effectively fostering a national identity. According to Wedeen, this case demonstrates how national unity, or 'nationness,' can be formed from shared experiences and fears, rather than from state structures or institutions alone.

identity. The strong regional identities and divides in Yemen, further emphasized by movements like the Southern Movement in 2007, question the notion of a unified Yemeni nationalism. These factors illustrate that collective vulnerability or significant events, while potentially fostering temporary unity, do not necessarily lead to a lasting, cohesive national identity. Yemen's national identity is influenced by a range of socio-economic, historical, and regional factors, extending beyond momentary unity experienced in specific events or locations.

Lastly, it is also important to note that in recent years, there has been an increase in research exploring different aspects of Yemeni identity and its fragmentation. While this research is valuable, it does not center specifically on Yemeni nationalism or Yemeni national identity per se (Nasser 2015; Eleiba 2022; Alasrar 2018; Othman 2023; Al-Thawr 2022). This is with the exception of the work that comes out of some secessionists in the south, such as the Free South Arabian League Party "Alrabitah" [حزب رابطة الجنوب العربي الحر (الرابطة)], which outright rejects Yemeni identity altogether.[4]

### 2.2.2 Yemeni Nationalism as a Modern Phenomenon

Beyond the works of Halliday (1990, 1997) and Wedeen (2008), the limited scholarship that addresses Yemeni nationalism and its development, often merely touching on it briefly, tends to favor a perennialist interpretation, or more generously, leans towards an ethno-symbolic perspective. An example of such a viewpoint is Paul Dresch's (1993, 2000) account. Dresch's argues that even though the modern call for Yemeni unity came from a specific political situation, Yemen was not invented as many of the world's nations were. To illustrate, he contends that the Middle East's borders were often drawn by colonial powers, and these newly formed countries have since developed their own histories. For example, Iraq and Jordan, created by the British in the 1920s, now reference histories that predate their modern statehood, like ancient Babylon or Roman and Nabatean ruins. Yemen is different, he argues. Its history feels more "real" and linked to its current identity. Traditions of Yemen before Islam are at the heart of Islamic literature and have been consistently preserved in local works since then. The concept of Yemen has been continuous, both in academic circles and among the general population.

What this account (that of Dresch and others) gets wrong is not that certain practices have existed since antiquity or that they predate modern statehood, rather it is the attribution of new meaning to old practices and objects (build-

4 For further details see: https://salparty.org/.

ings, land, etc.). The essence of nationalism, including Yemeni nationalism, is rooted in the modern reinterpretation of ancient practices. Consider a building: in ancient times, it might have served as a temple, but today, it is a museum or government office. The structure remains, but its meaning has evolved. This transformation in perception and meaning is what defines modern nationalism. It's not about the direct continuation of past practices, but rather how we reinterpret, reimagine, and integrate these historical elements into our current national narratives, thereby providing depth, legitimacy, and continuity to our modern sense of nationhood.

Therefore, Yemen's national identity, often perceived as ancient, is in fact a modern construct, shaped by various contemporary factors. Halliday (1997) highlights this modernity through potential alternate histories:

> … Given the divisions within Yemeni society prior to, and indeed accompanying, the rise of the nationalist movement, other outcomes are more than conceivable: Aden could have remained separate, becoming eventually a separate cosmopolitan nation-state, an Arab equivalent of Singapore to the rest of the Yemen's Malaysia, a Qatar or a Kuwait; the Hadramaut could also have broken away as could any of the other seventeen political entities in the South or the Zeidi parts of the North;[28] political Yemen could have extended to include the southern, Dhofar, region of the Sultanate of Oman, an area historically claimed by Yemenis and with more geographic and social continuity with the Mahra province of Yemen than with the rest of Oman.[29] Had the Saudis pursued their conquests in 1934, the whole of North Yemen might have been incorporated into Saudi Arabia and Yemen would today have the status of Hijaz … Equally, had the British not been there, the Saudis might have annexed Hadramaut, a region where "Yemeni" sentiment is intermittent at best and that would have given them direct access to the Indian Ocean.
>
> HALLIDAY 1997, 37

The possibility that either Aden or Hadramout could have emerged as autonomous nation-states, or that North Yemen might plausibly have been incorporated into Saudi Arabia, underscores the inherently contingent and mutable nature of Yemeni national identity. These hypothetical scenarios demonstrate that the concept of Yemen is not a historical inevitability, but rather a product of modern political and social contingencies.

## 3 The Evolution of Yemeni Nationalism

Nations, much like living entities, have life cycles—they emerge, evolve, and sometimes, cease to exist or divide into multiple entities. Yemeni nationalism's life cycle began in the early 20th century. The formation of a Yemeni national consciousness was deeply intertwined with its colonial history, marked by British administration in the South and Ottoman rule in the North. These powers, through their distinct administrative and legal systems, inadvertently laid the foundations for Yemeni nationalism. For instance, the British separation of Aden from its hinterland fostered new social and political realities. Simultaneously, by introducing local bureaucracy and a state archiving system for legal documents, the Ottomans inadvertently fostered a sense of unique Yemeni identity as the local population had to navigate between traditional ways and the new systems imposed (Wedeen 2008b). This phase was also influenced by the broader regional developments such as Arab nationalism, the rise of Saudi Arabia, the Palestine question, and the Egyptian revolution of 1952. These key regional developments, each playing a pivotal role, influenced not just the political landscape but also resonated with Yemen's own evolving identity (Halliday 1997).

Between 1960 and 1990, Yemen underwent significant transformations in its national life cycle, marked by the solidification of Yemeni nationalism and major political changes. By the 1960s, Yemeni nationalism was already solidified. During this period, there was a prevailing sense of unity, with people believing in shared history, land, and destiny. This unity was evident in the speeches of the leaders from both North and South and in the shared battles against common foes, such as the Northerners fighting against the British in the South (Halliday 1997) However, despite this growing sense of nationalism, Yemeni nationhood was not fully realized in the 1960s because unity was not achieved. The 1960s were a time of significant political upheaval, with revolutions occurring in both North and South Yemen. In the North, the 1962 overthrow of the Imamate led to the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). This momentous political change was succeeded by a seven-year war. The war's conclusion produced a government that, while officially republican, actually combined conservative and republican elements. Concurrently, the South gained independence from British colonialism in 1967, after years of anti-colonial struggle, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) was established in 1969, following the Corrective Movement, embracing a Marxist-Leninist ideology. Despite the disparities (i.e. the development of ideologically opposing regimes) a shared aspiration for Yemeni unity persisted throughout until 1990 (Lackner 2017a). In 1990, Yemen achieved

its long-awaited unity, a result of both the country's distinct historical paths and the shifting geopolitical landscape in the wake of the Cold War (Halliday 1990).

The unification of Yemen in 1990, merging YAR and PDRY, marked another pivotal moment in this life cycle of Yemeni nationalism. It was undeniably a significant milestone, marked by public celebrations (Lackner 2017a). Arguably, the 1990 unity marked the zenith of Yemeni nationalism. This assertion is grounded in the fact that of the three pillars of Yemeni nationalism—Yemeni people, Yemeni land, and Yemeni state—the latter was the only element yet to be fully realized until that decade (Whitaker 2009) This unification, however, was not just the culmination of a historical process but also the beginning of a new and complex chapter. The optimism of the early 1990s was soon overshadowed by the civil war in 1994, a stark reminder of the underlying complexities and challenges facing the newly unified nation. This civil war in 1994 marked the onset of another critical phase in the life cycle of Yemeni nationalism.

### 3.1 *The Failure of Yemeni Unity 1990–1994*

Describing the failure of the 1990 unification, Dunn (1994), in his article "The Wrong Place, the Wrong Time: Why Yemeni Unity Failed," states that firstly, the differences in the two states' previous systems were not adequately addressed; while North Yemen was conservative, Islamist, and governed by a tribal elite, South Yemen had been a secular, leftist state following a Marxist-Leninist model for over 20 years. Secondly, although the land areas of South Yemen and North Yemen were similar in size, the population of the north was significantly larger, with 80% of Yemen's population residing in North Yemen at the time. Thirdly, Saleh's support for Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait led to the Gulf states expelling around 800,000 Yemenis, which further increased the economic burden on the unified state.

However, it is equally, if not more important, to take into consideration how events unfolded after 1990 in order to understand the failure of unity. For instance, the assassination of several YSP (Yemeni Socialist Party) leaders, falling oil prices, conflicting interests between Saleh and Al-Beidh, and the limited number of seats the YSP secured in the 1993 parliamentary elections all contributed to the growing tensions (Wedeen 2008, 1–66; Lackner 2023, 26–33). As a result of the hastily implemented unification process, a war broke out in April 1994, during which the North conquered the South, and unity was maintained by force. Consequently, many YSP leaders either left the country or withdrew from politics altogether. Some Southerners, particularly in areas such as Dali', continued to reject unity and frequently protested against the

regime. The unification that persisted after 1994 resulted in a state controlled by Saleh, who ruled using the same autocratic and patronage-based system he had employed in the YAR since 1978. For example, individuals from Saleh's hometown of Sanhan were recruited into important military positions and received high-quality training and supplies (Lackner 2017a).

## 4 The Disintegration of Yemeni Nationalism

Before delving into the disintegration of Yemeni nationalism, it is important to note that Yemen's national identity did not solidify properly after unification. The fragile foundations of unity, marked by unaddressed divisions between North Yemen's conservative, tribal governance and South Yemen's secular, Marxist-Leninist system, set the stage for ongoing discord, though the ideological differences should not be overemphasized. Economic strain following the Gulf War, the exclusion of Southern leaders from power, and Saleh's autocratic, patronage-based rule deepened these fractures. Instead of fostering a shared national identity, these events entrenched divisions, leaving Yemeni nationalism fragile.

### 4.1 *Fragile Nationalism—1994 to 2007*

The period between 1994 and 2007 in Yemen can be characterized as a phase of fragile nationalism. This fragility is reflected not only in the weakening of a unified national identity but also in the concurrent strengthening of alternative regional identities.

The 1996 Rape Case in Hadramout, where a criminal issue escalated into widespread demonstrations, is a poignant example (Day 2012). This incident, where two women's arrest and assault (one of whom was raped) by a northern policeman escalated into widespread demonstrations across Hadramout. Rather than being treated as a mere criminal issue, the case was politicized, resulting in accusations of a conspiracy against the North, revealing the underling regional tension and mistrust. Then, the controversy over President Saleh's attire at the G8 Summit in 2004 further exemplified this fragility ("Al Arabiya 2004").

Saleh's choice to dress in the traditional clothes of the North led to controversy throughout the country. This decision was labeled as "separatist" by opponents, who argued it represented a preference for Northern customs over those of other Yemeni regions. The government and pro-government media fiercely defended the president's choice, accusing the opponents of acting unpatriotically and presenting the clothing as a celebration of Yemeni cultural heritage.

This incidence highlighted how a seemingly simple choice of clothing at an international event could become a catalyst for intense national debate, reflecting the precarious and vulnerable state of Yemen's national identity.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the inherent fragility of unity was the rise of the Southern Movement in 2006–2007 (Day 2010). The Southern Movement arose primarily in response to the perceived (and actual) marginalization of the South following 1994. Its rise was not just a reaction to contemporary policies; rather, it reflects a long-standing issue in Yemen's national fabric. The movement's strong denial of Yemeni unity after 1994—some factions even going so far as to deny Yemeni identity altogether—demonstrates how deep the division was. This occurrence was more than just a political disagreement; it was a glaring indicator of Yemeni nationalism's underlying fragility.

### 4.1.1 Explaining the Fragility

In explaining the fragility of Yemeni nationalism, it is first crucial to recognize the fluidity inherent in national identities. Thus, there's nothing unusual about the decline or fragility of nationalism, as witnessed in Yemen. Against this background, we can now examine the factors contributing to Yemen's fragility after 1994. A confluence of interconnected factors led to this fragility. Key among these is the negative shift in material conditions, the strength of regional identities and historical legacies, and the divisive and weak nature of the regime.

#### 4.1.1.1 *South Yemen: A Negative Shift in Material Conditions*

The significant shift in material conditions following the 1994 civil war brought about significant changes that were instrumental in the gradual disintegration of Yemeni nationalism. The immediate aftermath saw extensive looting in Aden, primarily by individuals from the northern highland. The extent of this looting was so substantial that traffic congestion became emblematic of the massive transfer of goods from the southern regions to the mountains in the North. This event was not just a physical transfer of goods; it symbolized a deeper shift in power and resources from the south to the north (Day 2012). Simultaneously, political maneuvers led to the dismissal of over 86,000 military and security personnel from Southern governorates. Termed "retirement" officially, this move was more than a workforce reduction—it was a strategic decision to diminish the South's influence, thus fracturing the sense of a united Yemeni nation (Lackner 2017b).

The administrative landscape post-war underwent a dramatic transformation. Northern Yemenis, particularly from northern highlands, came to occupy a significant share of administrative roles in the South, holding 50–75% of essential positions in key regions like Lahij, Aden, and Hadramaut. This north-

ern dominance in administration served not just as a power shift but as a symbol of the diminishing presence and influence of the South in its own territories (Day 2012).

This dominance by the northern elites was not merely a matter of occupying administrative roles. The taxation framework post-1994 was heavily skewed in favor of these northern highland elites. The southern provinces bore a disproportionately higher tax burden. Yet, much of this revenue, at times almost half of the total government spending, was funneled back into northern highland tribal networks (Day 2012).

Land and property dynamics post-1994 starkly illustrated the growing north-south divide. Vast southern land areas were seized and redistributed to northerners, many with connections to the political and tribal leaders of the northern highlands (Day 2012). It is even argued that fifty percent of land in Aden was seized by northern elites (Dahlgren 2008). As Steven Day notes, this wasn't just about land ownership. It was a powerful, symbolic assertion of the North's power and the South's subjugation (Day 2012).

The centralization of the economy post-1994 also played a pivotal role in national dissolution. Southern businesses found themselves needing to forge ties with Sana'a to secure licenses and investment safeguards (Lackner 2017b). Post-1994, oil corporations like the Canadian Nexen in Aden shifted base to Sana'a. For example, despite housing most of the nation's oil reserves, Hadramawt governorate only benefits from a minuscule 1% of the oil income, highlighting the economic disparities contributing to the erosion of national unity (Alley and al-Iryani 2008).

Lastly, Aden's industrial sector suffered profound repercussions. Discrimination in employment became prevalent, with jobs migrating to Sana'a and southern professionals finding it challenging to establish necessary connections. This shift further deepened the regional and economic divides within Yemen (Lackner 2017b). These various shifts—socioeconomic, administrative, and political—collectively contributed to the waning of Yemeni nationalism. The perception and reality of northern dominance, as these events suggest, played a critical role in fragmenting the once unified national identity of Yemen.

However, this doesn't paint the complete picture. In many instances, as highlighted in the literature, wars and material disparities have led to an increase in national sentiment. In Ukraine, national sentiment has intensified due to the ongoing conflict (Kulyk 2023). It's also true that wars and material disparities can lead to national decline. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, for instance, was partly due to economic stagnation and disparities, which fueled nationalistic movements in various republics (Carroll 2012).

The nature and perception of these factors—war and material disparities—and how they interact with other factors are critical in determining their impact on national sentiment. In the case of Yemen, the presence of strong regional identities and historical legacies—along with a negative shift in material conditions—played a significant role in negatively influencing national sentiment.

#### 4.1.1.2 *The Existence and Persistence of Strong Regional Identities and Historical Legacies*

Regional or local identities in Yemen have always been strong. This trend isn't recent; historic "Yemen" has witnessed this since antiquity. Consequently, when individuals find their broader national identity problematic, they gravitate towards these regional identities, often sidelining national affiliations. This pattern is evident both historically and in contemporary times, in regions like Hadramout (Day 2012), Aden (Bujra 1970), and Tihamah (Jalal 2021).

Adding to this complexity, there's the significant historical context of two separate states preceding the formation of the Republic of Yemen. Especially in the South, there's a persistent tendency to compare material conditions from the times of the former state to the current situation (Augustin 2021). Given that many have and feel their material conditions deteriorated after the forced union of 1994, it has bred resentment against the current state and fostered nostalgia for the previous, pre-unity state and its conditions. This nostalgic feeling was particularly pronounced in the 2007 Southern Movement, with many expressing a desire to revert to the state they felt they had lost. Furthermore, the resistance to the idea of unity, particularly as conceptualized post-1994, remained a recurring theme both within and outside Yemen. This resistance was intermittently visible through demonstrations in regions like Ad Dali' and more structurally in groups like the National Front for the Southern Resistance and the Movement for the Right of Self-Determination (Nagi 2022). Even though the 1994 war culminated with the northern highlands claiming victory, the ripples of this resistance, albeit subdued, persisted.

#### 4.1.1.3 *A Weak and Divisive Regime*

Taking the above factors into account, along with the reality that the Yemeni regime was both weak and unwilling to assert its authority over the populace (Phillips 2011), it is evident that these conditions were likely to result in a fragile nation, if not something more severe. Post-1994 Yemen saw a regime that was not only divided in its internal dynamics but also weak in addressing the country's growing challenges. President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime failed to foster a sense of national unity. Instead, the regime's actions often exacerbated regional disparities and deepened societal divisions. The regime's approach,

focusing more on maintaining power through patronage and alliances with tribal and military elites, neglected the broader needs of nation-building and effective governance. This focus on maintaining power often led to decisions that favored a certain segment of the society (predominantly the northern highlands), alienating other regions, especially the South, and contributing to the sense of marginalization and disenfranchisement.

## 5 A Disintegrating Nation—2007 to 2015

The emergence of the Southern Movement in 2007 marks a distinct shift towards the disintegration of Yemeni nationalism. This movement, initially focused on redressing grievances from the post-1994 era, and gradually evolved into a political force challenging Yemeni national identity.

### 5.1 *The Southern Movement*

The movement Initially began with specific demands, particularly from retired southern military officers who sought reinstatement and a redress for grievances following their perceived (and actual) unfair treatment after the 1994 civil war. This phase was marked by calls for justice and compensation for what was seen as the northern appropriation of land and resources in the south, leading to a sense of occupation and exploitation among southern people. Over time, the demands of the Southern Movement became more politically oriented. Factions within the movement began advocating for varying degrees of political change. This ranged from enhanced autonomy within a federal Yemeni state to complete secession and the re-establishment of an independent southern state. The call for secession particularly, gained momentum, reflecting deep-rooted dissatisfaction with northern-dominated governance (Lackner 2017b; Schmitz 2016). Yemen's Arab Spring protests in 2011, calling for the end of Saleh's rule, added a new dimension to the Southern Movement. While these protests weren't initiated by the Southern Movement, the ensuing political instability provided a fresh impetus for southern grievances to be aired. The Southern Movement's Post-Arab Spring became more fragmented with some factions aiming for complete independence and others seeking to participate in the national dialogue to reform the whole country's governance structure (Schmitz 2016)

There are a few things to note about the Southern Movement. First, it is partly reactionary to immediate grievances and events, but more crucially, it represents and feeds on a gradual coalescence of long-standing grievances. These grievances stem from the material conditions and disparities created

after the 1994 war (Lackner 2017b). Second, the movement began as a leaderless, organic, and locally driven entity, uniting individuals across various social strata around a shared set of grievances. It largely maintained its independence from formal political structures and parties. This detachment was further reinforced by a general distrust among movement activists towards the opposition parties, particularly due to their perceived complicity with the government (Dahlgren 2008). Third, as the movement evolved, it experienced significant fragmentation, with different groups and leaders emerging. Prominent figures like Ali Salem al Beidh, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, Ali Nasir Muhammad, Abd Al-Rahman Ali Al-Jifri, and Aydarus al-Zubaidi played influential roles in various factions of the movement. This divergence in leadership was reflected in the formation of various political entities, such as the Supreme National Council for the Liberation and Independence of the South, the National Body for the Independence of the South, the National Body for Peaceful Struggle, and the Leadership Council of the Peaceful Revolution for the Liberation of the South. Each entity presented a unique stance and strategic approach, signifying a broad spectrum of perspectives and objectives within the movement. (al-Hamdani and Lackner 2020; Schmitz 2016).

The Southern Movement in Yemen and its evolution from 2007 onwards highlights key aspects of national disintegration, going beyond mere problems in governance, state administration, or expressions of strong regional identities. The Southern Movement's transition from addressing specific grievances (like the reinstatement of retired military officers and reparation for post-war injustices) to questioning the very political structure of Yemen (including calls for secession) represents a significant shift. It shows a progression from addressing issues within the existing national framework to fundamentally challenging the legitimacy and viability of that national framework itself. When a substantial portion of the population no longer sees their future aligned with the current nation-state, it's strong evidence of a disintegrating nation.

### 5.2 *Case Study: South Arabian Identity*

A clear example demonstrating the disintegrating nature of Yemeni nationalism is a faction within the Southern Movement that rejects Yemeni national identity and advocates for a completely different national identity: that of South Arabia. South Arabia's identity is portrayed as distinct from Yemeni identity, and is rooted in the historical, cultural, and political experiences of the southern region. Key figures such as al-Bid and al-Jifri further emphasize South Arabia's unique identity by tracing it back to ancient pre-Islamic civilizations, separating it from Yemen. For instance, some cited that the emergence of the

early South Arabian state after the victory of the Hamiri over the Sumerian Ma'inians in 3200 B.C. in Eastern Dhofar laid the initial foundations of a separate South Arabian identity (Al-Sulaimani 2022). However, the concept of South Arabian identity mainly invokes the time before 1967 when the region was known as South Arabia, with many seeing this period as the true and original ideal. Some activists of South Arabian identity consider the socialist rule (1967–1990) and the subsequent unification with North Yemen as foreign and not in alignment with the history of the South. In a joint statement, historical leaders like al-Bid and al-Jifri underscore the South Arabian identity, stating that the territory of the PDRY is South Arabia and its citizens are South Arabians. They stress that "this territory was never called or belonged to Yemen". This highlights the clear tension between South Arabian and Yemeni identities, indicating a profound split in the region's understanding of national identity.

Below are two quotes taken from an ethnography (2014–2015) conducted by Anne-Linda Amira Augustin in the South (Augustin 2021). These quotes reflect strong and varied support for South Arabian identity, highlighting the differences between South Arabia and Yemen, and emphasizing the desire to preserve and reestablish this unique identity.

– Sayf, a retiree from Abyan, speaks about the differentiation between South Arabia and Yemen: "We are southerners, not Yemenis, and honestly, that is the problem here .... Even many of the former socialists say now that we are not [Yemenis]."
– Haydar, a student activist, emphasizes the uniqueness of the South Arabian identity by drawing an analogy with other nation-states in the region, poses a question: "Do you believe that Saudi Arabia would unite with the North? ... Do you believe that Oman would unite with Kuwait? The same issue".

The ethnographic evidence on South Arabian identity vividly demonstrates the disintegrating nature of Yemeni nationalism, anchored deeply in a historical narrative that markedly predates Yemen's formation, revealing a profound sense of distinctness. References to ancient victories and pre-Islamic civilizations distinguish South Arabian lineage from that of Yemen, while the portrayal of socialist rule and the later unification with North Yemen are seen as periods of alien domination and emphasize a cultural and political chasm. Expressions of identity in the quotes—ranging from Sayf's clear distinction between Southerners and Yemenis, to the collective nostalgia for a historical identity among the youth and elders, and Haydar's illustrative comparisons of South Arabian unity with Yemen to other implausible national unities—underscore a deep-seated perception of uniqueness. Further, the official stance of leaders like al-Bid and al-Jifri, who declare the land and people of the former PDRY as distinctly South Arabian and not Yemeni, add a potent dimension to these

sentiments. This insistence on a unique South Arabian identity, encompassing diverse historical, cultural, and political experiences, marks a clear disintegration of Yemeni nationalism, revealing a redefined and divided national landscape.

## 6 The 2015 War Onward

The war beginning in 2015 represents a clear descent toward the disintegration of Yemeni nationalism. This period has seen the exacerbation of regional divides and the rise of distinct identities that challenge the notion of a unified Yemen. The recent surge in literature focused on Yemen's national identity since the commencement of the war in 2015 underscores this crisis. Researchers such as Fatima Abo Alasrar (2018), Shaima Bin Othman (2023), Sabria Al-Thawr (2022), Ahmed Eleiba (2022), and Afrah Nasser (2015) have contributed to this growing body of work, suggesting deep underlying ruptures and fractures within the concept of a united Yemeni nation. Their analysis and writing illustrate that Yemeni nationalism has increasingly sunk into a state of disintegration, highlighting a critical transformation in the nation's identity.

### 6.1 *The 2015 War: The Accelerating Descent toward Disintegration*

The Yemeni Civil War, escalating significantly in 2015, began as an internal conflict but rapidly morphed into a regional power struggle. The Houthi movement, "representing" the Zaidi Shiite minority, captured the capital, Sana'a, and forced President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi to flee, first to Aden, then to Saudi Arabia. This Houthi expansion alarmed Saudi Arabia, which, perceiving the Houthis as Iranian proxies, led a Saudi-led intervention to restore Hadi's government. The involvement of Saudi Arabia and its allies turned the conflict into a broader regional confrontation, with Iran rightly accused of backing the Houthis.

The conflict also highlighted Yemen's north-south divide. The Southern Transitional Council (STC), backed by the United Arab Emirates, emerged in 2017, demanding greater autonomy or independence for southern Yemen. This movement complicated the conflict further, adding another layer to the already complex political and military landscape.

As of the beginning of 2024, the situation remains tangled and volatile despite numerous attempts at peace and temporary truces. The Houthi faction has maintained control over significant territories, most notably the capital, Sana'a, and a significant proportion of the population. This time period is notable for an increase in Houthi-initiated attacks on international shipping

lanes, raising serious concerns about regional stability and global maritime security. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, which has been under scrutiny for a long time for its role in the Yemeni conflict, is increasingly looking for ways to exit the ongoing and complex Yemeni crisis. Despite these changing circumstances, Yemen's humanitarian crisis has continued unabated, worsening the plight of countless people and emphasizing the critical need for a long-term and effective resolution to the ongoing conflict.

## 6.2 *The Yemeni Civil War and Further Disintegration of Nationalism 2015 Onward*

The Yemeni Civil War, when viewed through the lens of literature examining the relationship between war and nationalism, illustrates why such a conflict is expected to lead to the disintegration of national identity. This expectation arises from several key factors discussed in academic literature, such as the nature of the conflict (Christia 2012; Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth 2020; Kulyk 2023; Haller 2003), state capacity (Alesina 2020), societal structures (Varshney 2021), international dynamics (Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth 2020), and the role of leadership (Varshney 2021).

Firstly, the nature of the conflict in Yemen, deeply entangled in internal and external political dynamics, aligns with the historical observations that civil wars, particularly those involving numerous factions and foreign interventions, lead to the fragmentation of national identity. Unlike conflicts perceived as just or defensive, which might strengthen national unity, Yemen's war, with its intricate web of local and regional interests and its portrayal as part of a larger proxy conflict between regional powers, resembles conflicts where national sentiments become deeply divided.

State capacity, or rather the lack thereof, in Yemen further exacerbates this fragmentation. The Yemeni government's inability to exert control or provide basic services, compounded by its dependence on Saudi Arabian support is indicative of a case in which weak state capacity has led to a decline in national sentiment. A government perceived as a puppet lacks the credibility and efficacy needed to inspire or sustain nationalistic feelings among its population. Furthermore, the societal structures within Yemen, marked by deep divisions in terms of political, religious and regional affiliation, inherently challenge the notion of a unified Yemeni national identity. These divisions have been intensified by the war, as various groups vie for autonomy, influence, or dominance. This scenario echoes the observation that internal societal divisions can lead to a heightened fragmentation of national identity during times of conflict.

International dynamics also play a crucial role. The clear involvement of regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the global geopolitical interests

at play, transform the conflict into a broader regional confrontation, thus diluting the sense of a uniquely Yemeni struggle. The war stops being about Yemeni national interests and becomes more about the strategic interests of external powers. Such circumstances are likely to lead to a loss of national morale and unity, as the national agenda is overshadowed by the priorities of more dominant international players.

Finally, the role of the elite leadership in Yemen has not been conducive to fostering a strong, unified national sentiment. The lack of a unifying, charismatic figure or group, capable of rallying the nation and articulating a vision for a united Yemen, has been starkly missing. Instead, leadership has been fragmented, with multiple authorities claiming legitimacy. Therefore, the Yemeni Civil War, with its complexities, aligns with the academic understanding that certain types of conflicts, particularly those characterized by internal divisions, external interventions, weak state capacity, and fragmented leadership, are expected to lead not to the strengthening, but rather to the disintegration of national identity.

## 6.3 *Case Study: Houthi Control and the Southern Transitional Council*

The divergent paths taken by the Houthi movement in the North and the STC in the South illustrate the fragmentation of national identity. Each group's distinct political agenda and governance model reflect the deepening divide in Yemen's national landscape.

### 6.3.1 Education and School Assemblies

Shaima Bin Othman's (2013) analysis provides concrete examples of this fragmentation, elucidating how school assemblies across different regions are being utilized to cultivate divergent political and national identities. In Houthi-controlled Sana'a, substantial curriculum modifications, such as mandatory chanting of the Sarkha and ideological renaming of schools, are fostering a sectarian identity. This environment not only alienates non-Houthi Yemenis but also encourages a new, ideologically driven generation.

In Aden, under the Southern Transitional Council (STC) control, the promotion of symbols and rituals from the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) is fanning the flames of southern independence and framing northern Yemen as an intruding entity. Conversely, in Hadhramaut, the political mosaic has resulted in a void of national identity, with schools adopting neutral stances. However, this neutrality in educational institutions hasn't insulated the young population from encountering conflicting nationalist beliefs in their daily lives. Bin Othman argues that such fragmentations are not only extending the current conflicts but also planting seeds for future disputes.

The emergence of disparate national identities is setting the foundation for enduring divisions, posing significant challenges to eventual reconciliation and peace. She asserts the need for a comprehensive approach to the Yemen conflict that addresses past injustices and leverages cultural diversity as a means for resolution, rather than as creating barriers.

### 6.3.2 The Iqial Movement

Another stark example of the disintegrating nationalism is the rise of "Iqial" identity or movement in 2017 (Sariya 2021). The Iqial movement in Yemen refers to a socio-political group or ideology emerging as a response to the Houthi movement's control and influence. The term itself, traditionally referring to notable figures in Yemeni society (e.g. the sons and grandsons of kings), has been appropriated by this modern movement to symbolize a reclamation and reassertion of broader Yemeni national values and identity against what they perceive as the divisive and sectarian policies of the Houthis. The Iqial movement appears to position itself as an advocate for national unity and egalitarianism, drawing upon historical and cultural symbols deeply ingrained in Yemeni consciousness. For example, their choice of the ibex as a symbol harks back to ancient Yemeni civilizations and signifies elements such as fertility, growth, and historical continuity. This symbolism and the rhetoric of the Iqial movement aim to galvanize the Yemeni populace by reviving and celebrating a shared historical and national heritage. The movement's approach and philosophy, however, are not without controversy. Opponents argue that, while Iqial's position rejects the Houthis' sectarianism, it may inadvertently replicate similar practices of exclusion and discrimination against certain groups, particularly those of Hashemite heritage. This tension highlights the complexities involved in consolidating a national identity, but more importantly, the fracture and decline in Yemeni national identity.

## 7 Conclusion

This paper has traced Yemeni nationalism's evolution, and, particularly, its decline, from a fragile state that began in 1994 to a more pronounced phase of disintegration that gained traction with the rise of the Southern Movement in 2007 and further exacerbation by the civil war in 2015. This shift in Yemeni nationalism is the result of the confluence of the three key factors. First, the negative shift in people's material conditions exemplified by the 1994 war and the resulting material inequality. Second, the presence of factors that facilitate nation dissolution, such as strong regional identities and weak state capabil-

ities. Third, the lack of mitigating factors that could balance the polarizing forces at play, such as a unifying leadership or a common adversary.

The study's findings highlight an important—but often overlooked—point in the field of nationalism studies: the disintegration of a national identity is as important as its formation. As previously noted, scholarly discourse has traditionally paid close attention to the formation and consolidation of national identities. State-building, shared culture, and collective history are emphasized, while the decline is either neglected or attributed to the failure of its proper establishment. Yemeni nationalism, on the other hand, demonstrates how critical it is to comprehend how national identity can decline. The current study adds to the body of knowledge on nationalism by emphasizing the fact that national identities are dynamic and susceptible to fragmentation under certain conditions.

Finally, this study contributes to demystifying the concept of national identity and dispelling its often-perceived fairy-tale quality, particularly in the Yemeni context. As a result, it becomes clear that the solution to Yemen's challenges may lie not only in addressing the root causes of national disintegration, but also in acknowledging and confronting the consequences of this disintegration. The notion that unity inherently holds a transcendent privilege over division is as unfounded as the reverse assumption. Recognizing this opens the possibility that, in certain contexts like Yemen, division as in secession or federalism could indeed represent the most viable path forward, as well as be a morally justified response. Such a choice, far from being unnatural or abnormal, might be a reasonable and realistic response. Embracing this perspective allows for a more flexible and nuanced approach to national identity, one that is responsive to the unique historical, cultural, and socio-political realities of Yemen.

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